A Game of Love and Chance

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Martutene
by Ramon Saizarbitoria, translated from the Basque by Aritz Branton, and edited by Cecilia Ross
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Estitxu Zabala/Irutxuloko Hitza

Ramon Saizarbitoria in Donostia, the Basque name for San Sebastián in northern Spain, 2015

A middle-aged married mother flying from Heathrow to Bilbao becomes fascinated by a bearded man boarding the same plane. When a bag he's holding breaks, spilling books into the aisle, she gives him a good strong Harrods bag and helps gather the books up. Grateful, and despite the crowd of frustrated passengers trying to get to their seats, the man reads a few words from one that has fallen open—"This book was written in good faith"—and offers it to the woman as a gift.

For weeks and months afterward she will regret not having accepted the book, not having made contact with this "intellectual looking" man who comes to infatuate her. It's true men are "cowardly," she reflects, but she too has not "been brave enough." Desperate to track him down, she contacts Iberia Airlines, telling all kinds of lies to find out the identity of the passenger with the books. In the end, she will be exploited by an airline employee who makes inquiries on her behalf in return for drinks and even sex. On the very last pages of this eight-hundred-page novel, she will find her man again at Bilbao Airport. Their meeting is not described. This is Harri's story.

A writer, male, and his translator, female, again in middle age, are on the brink of breaking up, their long relationship worn down by the writer's monstrous self-regard. The translator spends her days compiling an archive of all the phrases the writer has underlined in the many books he has read. Well-established and well-heeled but desperately afraid of dying, the writer writes about another writer, his terminally ill alter ego Faustino Iturbe, and Iturbe's troubled relationship with his partner Flora Ugalde ("misery is the only thing he's given [her]"), who resembles the writer's actual partner right down to the very obvious "mole on her jugular fossa."

The translator has learned to access the writer's computer, which he supposes is defended by a password, in order to read what he is writing about her and will eventually ask her to translate. Her dealings with other people are conditioned by her awareness that, having read the famous writer's books, they know everything about her intimate life, at least as seen from his point of view—for example, the time she betrayed him and received a poem from her younger lover praising her for being "loyal, more loyal than anyone." It is something the writer will never let her forget, though he is hardly without sin, one of his own betrayals having led to her contracting a venereal infection.

The only thing this unhappy couple seem genuinely to share is a preference for literature over life. They live in books and for books, often comparing their relationship with that of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. Most of all, they prefer books about books and writing about writing. In the final pages of *Martutene*, the translator at last finds the courage to break up with the writer and plan a book of her own, but he seems determined to win her back, with embarrassing displays of self-pity. This is Martin and Julia's story.

Abaitua and his wife Pilar, also in middle age, are likewise on the edge of a breakup. Or so it seems. Like Martin and Julia they have ceased to sleep together, though they do at least sleep in the same house and share the same bathroom. In fact it is mostly in or around the bathroom, in various states of undress, that they are painfully conscious of the fact

that they are no longer lovers. Abaitua is a gynecologist in a public hospital, his wife a neurosurgeon in a private clinic owned by her ailing father. Abaitua is afraid of denouncing the various corrupt practices in the hospital and in general hyperattentive to what his colleagues and patients think of him, while Pilar is anxious that, following her father's death, other members of the family will sell the clinic to real estate developers, depriving her of her vocation.

In the hospital, Abaitua meets Lynn, a young American sociologist from Columbia University who is collecting data on infant mortality, and begins an affair with her. Relaxed, free, and full of confidence, she encourages him to be brave and stand up for what he believes. Though he never finds the courage to tell her he loves her or to leave his wife, her inebriating influence does persuade him to denounce a senior surgeon and offer succor to a mistreated patient. As a result of this he is suspended from the hospital at exactly the moment he leaves Lynn.

The various characters are connected. Near the beginning of the novel, Abaitua examines the senile and incontinent mother of his old friend Kepa, who explains that he has left his wife after an argument over a Harrods bag that someone gave him on the flight back from London; he had insisted he bought only secondhand books in London, for the bookshop he runs, but after seeing the bag, his wife was convinced he was lying. So Kepa, who has now moved in with his dying mother, is the man of Harri's dreams.

Harri herself is an epidemiologist in Abaitua's hospital and an old friend of Martin's; Julia, the translator, is convinced the two slept together in the past. In the opening pages of the novel Harri is telling Martin and Julia the story of her airport infatuation when a new tenant arrives for the penthouse apartment in Martin's house—Lynn. Martin calls Lynn "the penthouse girl" and seems eager to impress, perhaps seduce, her.

In her early thirties, Lynn is as bookish as the others, and when Harri mentions the line "This book was written in good faith" she observes that these famous words, from the preface to Montaigne's essays, are quoted on the opening page of Max Frisch's autobiographical novel *Montauk*, which describes the Swiss author's brief affair, in old age, with his young American publicist, also called Lynn; the defining characteristic of their story is that they would love each other intensely, with no fears for the future, no guilt, and, above all, no consequences.

Throughout the coming relationship with Abaitua, Frisch's wish that "Lynn will not become the name for guilt" (Frisch was married at the time) is repeated by both lovers, indicating a fear that this will inevitably happen. All the characters in *Martutene* now read *Montauk*, the novel they suppose was dropped on the plane, drawing frequent parallels between their lives and the book, which ties them together in a web of complicity and gives them a literary frisson they all seem to appreciate.

Abaitua goes on a walking holiday with his friend Kepa and invites Lynn to join them, allowing their affair to begin. Since Lynn's apartment is above Martin's bedroom, their noisy lovemaking in the coming months will keep the writer awake, intensifying his irritation and self-pity and reminding him and Julia of their own previous betrayals and present lack of physical affection. Both Julia and Harri go to Abaitua with their gynecological problems, Julia recalling how the doctor treated her when she picked up the venereal infection from Martin, Harri discovering she has breast cancer and needs immediate and radical surgery. Lynn too, despite her exuberance, will discover that she has a pituitary tumor and will arrange to be operated on in the private clinic designated by her insurance company. When the scheduled surgeon doesn't turn up, it is Abaitua's wife Pilar who steps in to operate on her husband's mistress.

Described like this we could imagine *Martutene* as the kind of farce Alan Ayckbourn slyly staged or John Updike embellished in glittering prose, a story of hapless, middle-class liberals that would be entirely credible anywhere in the Western world. Even the location of Martin's house, in sight of the local railway station and the clinic, a place that so many of the characters must pass by, and then the situation of the penthouse apartment with its outside staircase where the characters can hardly help but bump into one another, seem perfectly contrived for light comedy.

Yet this is never the tone of this huge, mostly solemn novel, and these blatant fictional contrivances are hardly noticeable when spread out across a work of some 350,000 words (about the length of *The Brothers Karamazov*). In general, the author's commitment to evoking his characters' daily lives, conversations, and, above all, thoughts in quite extraordinary detail is so evident from the outset that the reader has no choice but to treat the book with the utmost seriousness or abandon it at once.

Martutene is in fact a suburb of San Sebastián in northern Spain some ten miles from the French border. However, in this novel the town is given its local name, Donostia, for this is the Basque country, and *Martutene*, by Ramon Saizarbitoria—a sociologist and author, now in his seventies and with some sixteen books to his name—was written not in Spanish but in Basque, a language spoken by only half of the two million inhabitants of this long-disputed region. The novel is translated by Aritz Branton, a native Basque speaker, with Cecilia Ross credited as editor;

whatever the division of labor, the overall result is a fluent if somewhat monotonous prose that hardly shifts register or rhythm from beginning to end.

Saizarbitoria's fictional writer, Martin, also writes in Basque, despite the fact that he has a greater range and ease of expression in Spanish. The publisher, Hispabooks, presents *Martutene* as the greatest Basque novel ever written (it has the colors of the Basque national flag on the cover), though I doubt I am alone in not being aware of other Basque novels or Basque authors. The work thus presents itself as one that, in this time of globalization, addresses the international metropolitan community from the provinces, demanding recognition for an old and highly specific culture in a larger world that threatens to become a monoculture.

Isolde Ohlbaum

Max Frisch with Alice Locke-Carey, who is called Lynn in Frisch's novel Montauk, *Graz, Austria, 1981*

This in part explains the novel's length. We are to learn everything about the Basque country. We are to visit restaurants with Basque specialties. We are to follow discussions about Basque poets, Basque politics, Basque history, and Basque customs of every kind. When Abaitua and Kepa take Lynn on their walking holiday, we discover the Basque landscape and learn about the relation of French Basques and Spanish Basques. In Place Jean Moulin in Bordeaux, the statue known as *Gloria Victis* (Glory to the Vanquished), which depicts an angel supporting the body of a dead soldier, though originally designed to "celebrate" the French defeat in the Franco–Prussian War of 1870–1871, is allowed to extend its poignancy across the blighted struggle for Basque independence:

> Sweet defeat…the sculpture transmits the idea of a sweet defeat…. Abaitua was brought up in the culture of defeat…. That's what his parents had passed onto him—defeat, if dignified, is beautiful.

Here we approach the book's claim to high seriousness. The position of all the characters in regard to one another, their loves, and their careers, is to be understood with respect to their relationship to Basque identity, particularly the armed struggle for Basque independence that ended only in 2011 when the ETA (the armed Basque separatist movement) declared a final cessation of hostilities. So at the opening of the novel we learn that Harri is in England to take her daughter to a boarding school where she can be away from "the conflict." On the plane home she is reading a history of Basque nationalism and worries that this right-wing book might put off the man she is attracted to, though she is partly attracted to him because he looks "like your typical Basque man."

Before living with Martin, the translator Julia was married to an ETA fighter who died in suspicious circumstances, having left a sealed envelope to give to their son on his fifteenth birthday. The boy, now fourteen, was baptized Zigor, his father's nom de guerre. It's "a name from the Middle Ages," Julia explains to Lynn, that "in Basque…means 'whip' or 'punishment.'" Is the dead man to be thought of as a warrior, a martyr, or a terrorist? Did he kill people? Was he himself killed? Different members of the family hold different views.

The young Zigor is involved in a school project to gather testimonies from the older members of the community about their experiences in the Spanish civil war. He is becoming interested in Basque history. Is his father's letter, from a violent past, going to encourage the boy to fight for Basque independence? Julia doesn't want the father "to determine his existence in any way other than genetically." She isn't even sure she should give him the letter.

This tension Julia experiences, between a deep attachment to Basque identity and a weariness with the associated violence, informs her preference for literature over life. The opening pages of *Martutene*, which are seen largely from Julia's point of view, are full of the names of writers—Blake, Nabokov, Flaubert, Beckett, Proust, Pascal, Woolf, Sartre—who constitute the extended virtual community she feels safe in. Almost anyone Julia meets or speaks of is immediately likened to someone from this international artistic group. A man talking loudly outside a cinema "looks slightly like Chabrol." Coming down the stairs in a white polo shirt, Martin "looks like F. Scott Fitzgerald." He uses a "Hemingway-style notebook." A book cover looks like a Hopper painting. And so on.

Basque literature, on the contrary, is not safe territory. It has shown "considerable tolerance for violence," Julia reflects. "Many writers and particularly our people's poets…have encouraged it." She "wanted the violence to stop before Basque patriotism was completely ruined by it…before Basque society became a sad case of collective cowardice."

Nevertheless, "having to deny dreams and feelings that she thought beautiful, that were part of her character, just because they once fed some people's madness hurts her." A weariness hangs over *Martutene*, a toxic blend of exhaustion, fearfulness, and guilt, to which only Lynn, the charming and ingenuous American, is immune.

When the novel's point of view is not with Julia, it passes to the equally anxious and self-conscious Abaitua—aren't you "bored of being Basque," he asks a friend—who habitually checks for bombs beneath his car. This is because his son, at university, had allowed some of his friends to use the family's small yacht moored in the bay, and they had taken advantage of this to store arms on it. On discovering the situation, Abaitua went to the police and the boys were arrested, but not his son. He fears reprisals and he wishes his son would emigrate to the US. A nurse at the hospital has a son in prison on terrorist charges. Abaitua suspects she despises him.

In general he feels people are always checking his commitment to Basque identity. He wonders if one of his patients switched to another gynecologist over the matter and is morbidly aware of whether people address him in Basque or Spanish. At home his wife, Pilar, tends to speak Spanish, despite having a Basque father, since he was a Franco supporter and believed the Basque country should be part of a united Spain.

As the novel progresses we realize that certain characters are linked by old resentments. During the civil war, Martin's separatist parents fled to France while Pilar's father appropriated his family's land to build his clinic. Martin himself as a young man had been a friend of Kepa's in the separatist movement. Their juvenile attempt to rob a bank in order to finance the organization ended in farce because the nervous Martin brought his dog along for company and insisted on using his own car, which he knew he could drive, rather than a stolen car he feared he might have trouble with. It is one of the book's few truly comic anecdotes.

Martin also failed to intervene manfully when Julia betrayed him. The novel he is writing—*The Man in Front of the Mirror*—tells of a novelist whose characters are "mostly men and women in relationships waiting for a story, their own story, to begin." The novelist himself "tries on stories in the same way that some other people try on suits." It seems that the paralysis of living in the aftermath of a failed political struggle prevents anyone from seeing a clear way forward. Even Martin's interminable writer's block—he should have finished his novel ages ago—is part of this Basque impasse.

What a relief, then, for these weary folk to welcome the American, Lynn, into their local lives and enjoy telling her about Basque folk traditions and the Basque language. The book is peppered with unpronounceable-looking Basque words, and Lynn is incorrigibly cheerful as she picks them up. "*Zertaz pentsatzen?*" She asks Abaitua in Basque what he's thinking about. And again: "She asks how to say *tender* in Basque. '*Samur*.' *Samurra zara*. You're tender." Clearly this is a nudge to readers to see ourselves in the same position as Lynn, to understand that for these intellectual Basques, national identity becomes a harmless pleasure only when it can be presented to someone from outside their world, someone like ourselves, the international liberal reader, someone who knows to shun violence and appreciate a small nation's cultural specificity.

What a pleasure, too, for Martin, Julia, and Abaitua to find in Max Frisch's *Montauk* a story that sets their own stalled stories in motion, allowing them to dream of an intense experience that will not, like the Basque struggle, have negative consequences. Amid *Martutene*'s endless meandering, its obsessive attention to detail, Julia's desire not to be a character in Martin's books and Harri's resentment that she has never been one, *Montauk* pops up again and again (128 times to be precise), in French and German and English and Spanish editions, offering our characters the possibility of shape and clarity.

When Martin orders a Ping-Pong table, Julia reflects, "It's obvious he's bought the Ping-Pong table to be able to play with his young tenant, because in *Montauk*, the writer called Max also enjoys playing Ping-Pong with the young woman called Lynn." As for Abaitua, he "can't stop thinking about different scenes from *Montauk* that seem to fit the situation." When he, Kepa, and Lynn stay in a hotel together, there is much discussion of a discrepancy in the Spanish translation of *Montauk* that suggests that when Frisch and his Lynn stayed in a hotel together, Frisch was irritated, not nobly, because Lynn had discovered how much he was paying for their luxurious room, but meanly, by the thought that she might not discover how generous he was being. The Spanish translator's betrayal here is discussed again and again, reminding us of the importance of loyalty to an embattled and betrayed community.

All the characters are astonished, even appalled, to discover in Peter Noll's book *In the Face of Death*, which Julia comes across in Kepa's bookshop, that Frisch's affair with Lynn had not in reality been without consequences; to the contrary, Frisch later sought her out, and the two lived together for some years. Abaitua's affair with Lynn will also have an aftermath, in their case disastrous, confirming the generally fearful atmosphere of the book.

All these connections and reflections make sense in retrospect, but during my reading of *Martutene* it seemed I was plowing through one long aimless paragraph after another, as if, like his hero Martin, Ramon Saizarbitoria was unable or unwilling to take his creations in any decisive direction. Or perhaps he is simply a master of transmitting that special mood of ennui, self-importance, and defeatism that his Basque characters all share.
